

Sermon, Easter 6A/Mother's Day 2023

https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Easter/AEaster6_RCL.html

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque, NM

The Rev. Sylvia Miller-Mutia, Associate Rector

Acts 17:22-31

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said,

'For we too are his offspring.'

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

John 14:15-21

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. **On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.** They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

Today, members of the Church throughout the world are celebrating the 6th Sunday of Eastertide. Today, some members of the Church, in some parts of the world, are also celebrating Mother's Day.

Unlike Easter, which is a season of universal celebration among Christians, the observance of Mother's Day is hardly universal, and definitely more complicated. For many of us, the idea of motherhood and Mother's Day is fraught, even painful, and I want to take a moment to recognize and honor that reality in this room. Our lives and our relationships and our feelings can be complicated and messy and hard. And our whole lives, our whole selves, are welcome here. Your whole life, your whole self, BELONGS here. Even the complicated, messy, hard parts. God's heart—and The Body of Christ (*and* this Community) are spacious and strong enough to hold all of You.

It can feel risky to even talk about Mother's Day in Church, but I think it's a risk worth taking for us here today. Because I think there is potential for our reflection today on one particular aspect of Motherhood—in tandem with our reflection on one particular part of John's Gospel—to open up some important and life-giving insights for all of us about who God is—and who we are—in relationship with God and in relationship to one another.

Now, make no mistake. Families come into being in all kinds of different ways. People assume the role of "mother" in all kinds of different ways, and there is a vast variety of ways in which and people in whom motherhood is embodied and experienced and expressed.

In my own life, I suppose, in a certain way, I first embodied the mystery of motherhood as a teenager, when I began choreographing ballets. Anyone who has ever conceived of an idea—a garden, a book, a class, or a sermon, a piece of music or art or robotics or dance—and had that idea gradually grow and take form within them, before laboring long and hard to bring it forth into the world will recognize how often the creative processes mirrors a process of pregnancy and birth.

I became a Mother in an entirely different way in my early 30s, when I was ordained to the priesthood...and the way that I experience and embody and express my vocation as "Mother Sylvia" has *continued* to grow and change throughout my years of ordained ministry.

I became a Mother in yet another way when I conceived each of my children. The way that I experience and embody Motherhood as the mother of my 3 kids: Alex, Johanna, and Lucia continually grows and changes as THEY grow and change. And the way I've experienced and embodied Motherhood in relationship to the pregnancies I've miscarried takes a different shape, still.

Jesus's Farewell discourse in John's Gospel (a portion of which we heard today) is beautiful and powerful and somewhat incomprehensible...a lot like motherhood, I suppose.

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus say to his disciples, **"On that day you will know that I am in my Father (my Abba), and you in me, and I in you."**

I intuitively sense that what Jesus is saying is true, even if I'm not quite sure what it means.

Just like I intuitively know that, as a mother, my children are an inextricable part of me, even though I can't quite explain what that means, either.

What's more, as my children grow up and move out into the world –I can hardly believe that my eldest, Alex, will graduate from High School next week! --I trust that some part of me remains within them, too.

The same might be said of all the dances I've created, and sermons I've written, and classes I've taught, and pregnancies I've carried, and congregations I've led.

This deep sense that somehow my offspring *are* in me and I *am* in them—paired with my affinity for the mystical poetry of Jesus's words in John's Gospel— prompts my fascination with a scientific phenomenon known as *microchimerism*. Microchimerism offers a scientific example that helps me describe my deepest hope and experience as a Mother—and a follower of Jesus—and a child of God.

If you've never heard of microchimerism (or if you just need a reminder), [One online article](#) explains the phenomenon in this way:

"As early as the second week of pregnancy, there is a two-way flow of cells and DNA between the fetus and the mother....some [of the cells coming from the fetus] persist and become embedded in various organs, and become a part of the parent...The fetal cells have been found to stay in the mother's body beyond the time of pregnancy...The mom's cells also stay in the baby's blood and tissues... including in organs like the pancreas, heart, and skin. In one study, more than half of adults still had maternal cells in their blood. In some cases, even cells from maternal grandmothers – acquired during a mother's own gestation – can be transferred to the fetus. Because some fetal cells stay in the mom's body for years, they are also sometimes transferred to future brothers and sisters of the first child. In this way, older siblings can contribute their cells to those of their younger siblings."

That's amazing, right? And not only are these shared cells a source of biological connection between grandmothers and mothers and children and siblings...these shared cells also seem to play some vital role in cellular survival, cellular regeneration, and cellular *healing*!

In his Farewell Discourse, Jesus says to his disciples: **"On that day you will know that I am in my Abba, and you in me, and I in you."**

It's as if Jesus is describing to his concerned and confounded disciples their participation (and ours) with him, in a divine, cosmic example of microchimerism.

In the Womb of God, our Source of Life, that ultimate reality in whom Paul insists in today's first reading from Acts, we all **"live and move and have our being"** there is a constant sharing of life between God, and Jesus, and you and me. And this applies to ALL of us **"Since"** as Paul also insists **"we are [all] God's offspring."** As we live and grow, together with one another and with Jesus in God, there is an ongoing mutual self-offering and sharing of life among us, the purpose of which is not only our mutual survival, but also our mutual regeneration and our mutual healing.

Our profound interconnection is both a physical and spiritual reality. In our Families, in our Communities, In the Body of Christ, we don't just belong to each other in a conceptual, hypothetical, metaphorical way. We are ACTUALLY part of each other. The Mysterious Mutual Indwelling that Jesus talks about in John's Gospel is an actual THING. Of course, our lived experiences of alienation and conflict and loneliness and isolation are also an actual THING. But in his Farewell Discourse, Jesus urges us to trust that our individual, isolated existence and alienation is never our ULTIMATE reality. We are made in and for connection. Connection is our deepest reality. It's in the Body and the Blood.

Jesus says to all his disciples and to each one of us: **"On that day you will know that I am in my Abba, and you in me, and I in you."**

Near, and far, and everywhere in between:
From the very beginning, now, in this moment, and through all eternity:
I am in you. And you are in me. And we are in God.

(Song)